

# SAN DIEGO

SEPTEMBER 1978/\$1.50

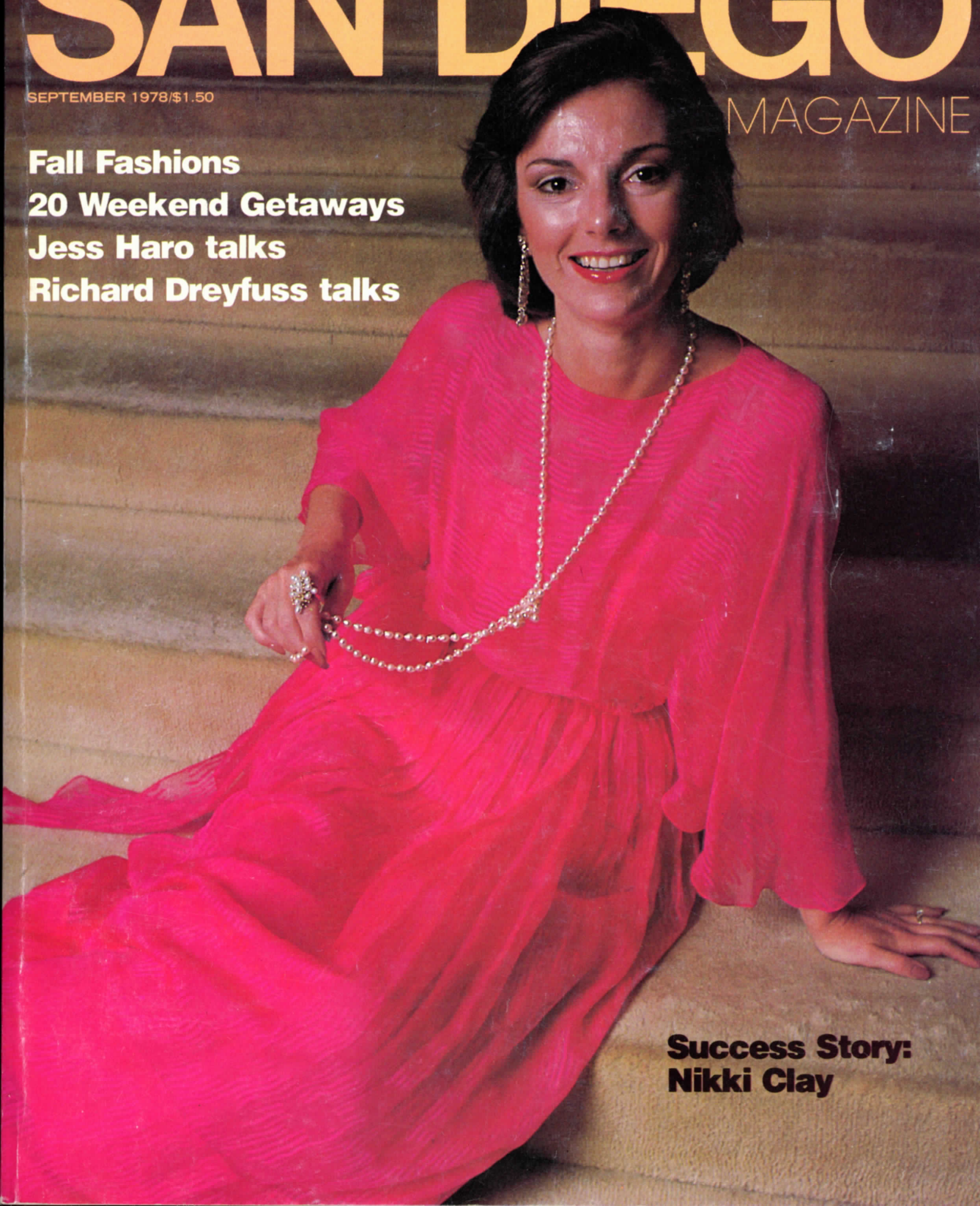
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# The Channel Islands

## Heeding the Siren Call to Adventure

by Walter Houk

Photography by Walter Houk

When islands can be seen offshore they seem almost to imply reproach—as if by staying on the workaday mainland you were overlooking romance and adventure beckoning tangibly close on the horizon.

Theirs is indeed a siren call, and here is how to heed it.

But first some words on our islands and their special character, for the appeal of these places is not the sensual lure of the tropical South Seas or the Caribbean, but of unfamiliar landforms, curious plants and the marine wildlife that can flourish only in the absence of man. Plus that enchantment that seems to be an essential ingredient of the island experience.

Though often blue-tinged and insubstantial-looking in the quavering sea air, those mountain profiles out there are real. They're called the Channel Is-

lands and there are eight of them. Five—and sometimes more—are visible from near sea level on the mainland, but you have to be up in a plane on a clear day to see all eight.

All but Santa Catalina are sparsely inhabited—by a radar station crew, ranch operators, a park ranger, or perhaps a summer field researcher in a tent. Or some may be empty of people at times.

The four islands in the southern group form a broad semicircle that starts with San Clemente, almost due west of San Diego.

The four northern Channel Islands form a straight line—actually a prolongation of the axis of the Santa Monica Mountains—due west from Point Mugu to a position just south of Point Conception.

As ancient mountaintops, these hulks of land exhibit dramatic forms, much

more so—and more satisfyingly so—than such low, flat tracts as the Bahamas, for example, or some Pacific coral atolls.

Here you see cliffs of awesome verticality—particularly on the south shores, where erosive waves of summer mercilessly assault the fragile land.

Here are caves big enough to take a boat into, caves of cathedral loftiness and dim religious light, caves eroded along fault lines of weakness in the living rock, caves often made boisterous by the cacophony of resident sea lions.

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**Right:** Due west from Point Mugu are the Anacapa Islands, ancient mountaintops of awesome verticality, rising from the Pacific. There are naturalist-led day-long excursions from Oxnard and Ventura that visit the coves, take you ashore, and make a circuit of the island close enough to see the wildlife, the sea lions, and the caves.





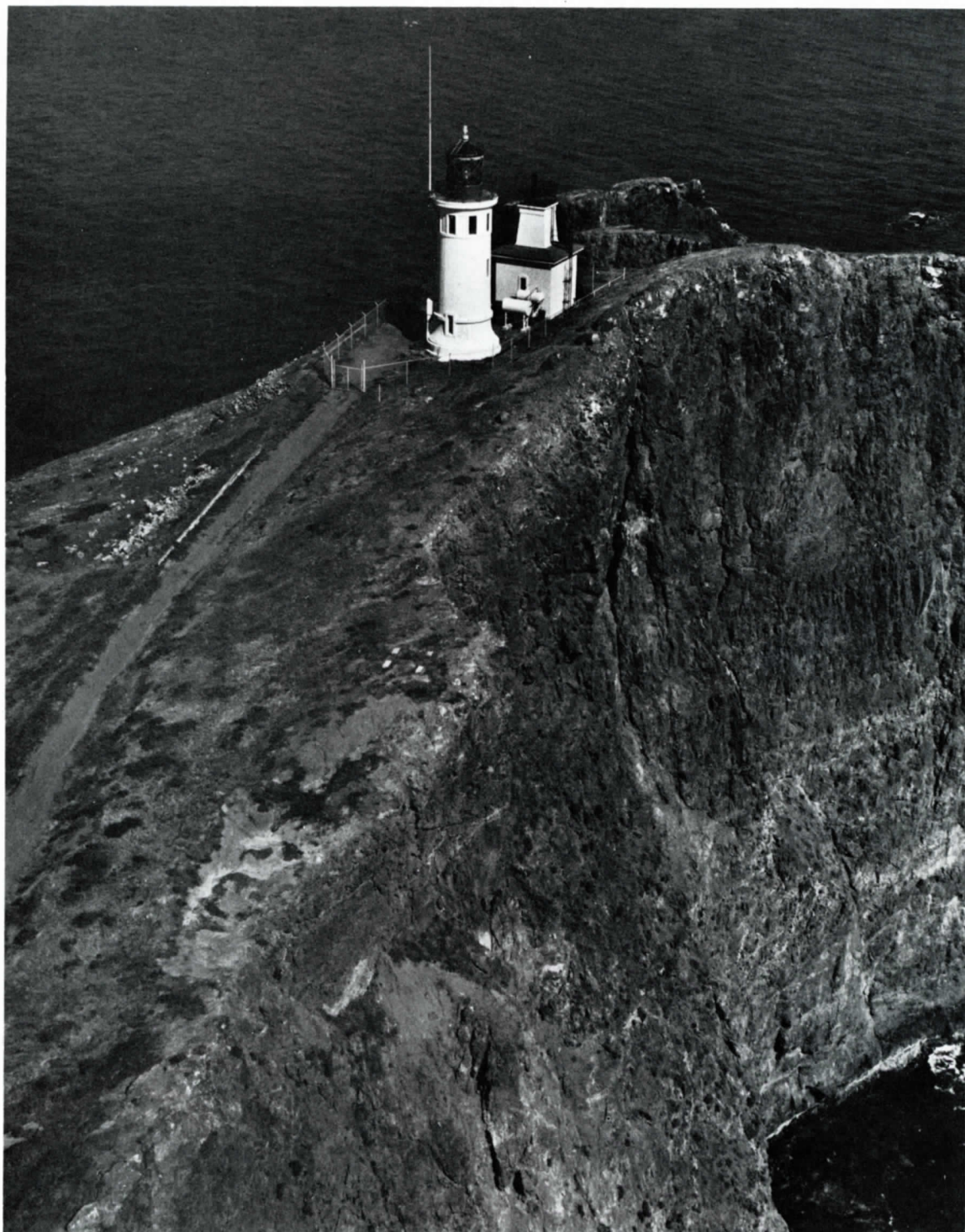






“ . . . Even the spacious beaches of Point Bennett on San Miguel are crowded these days with ponderous elephant seals by the thousands, miraculously back from the brink of extinction at the end of last century. . . ”

*See map on  
page 295*



**Left:** A sea lion visits a sleeping beach of elephant seals in an inaccessible cove of Santa Barbara Island.

Anacapa Light, with its booming foghorn, is perched on the wave-carved cliffs of East Anacapa Island, the most vertical of all the Channel Islands.







“ . . . Here are caves big enough to take a boat into, caves of cathedral loftiness and dim religious light, caves eroded along fault lines in the living rock, caves often made boisterous by the cacophony of resident sea lions . . . ”



The bleached timbers of beached shipwrecked vessels can be seen at San Miguel, a graveyard of ships. The island is also home to the largest sea elephant herd on earth.



Left: Rugged, tiny, steeply cliffed Santa Barbara Island sits alone near the geographic center of the Channel Islands. There are four-hour charter cruise excursions to see the caves, tunnel and the offshore rocks and reefs. It is well known as the island where Laysan gulls were discovered.